

# Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty

November 24, 2009

# Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty

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## 1. Introduction

On November 24<sup>th</sup> 2009, 100 community members came together to act on eliminating poverty in Saskatoon. The people present that day were able to build relationships and organize themselves around common priorities. The intent of this report is to inform participants and interested people about what resulted from the day, and also to keep these conversations alive and provide leadership and energy to coordinate and sustain the actions.

## 2. Working Together

A diverse mix of sectors and key interest groups are engaged in addressing poverty in Saskatoon. The following is a list of sectors and interest groups and organizations that had representation at the November 24<sup>th</sup> event:

- Not-for-profit/community service agencies
- Aboriginal
- Health
- Provincial government (including Education, Employment, Labour, Social Services, Housing, Legislature)
- City/municipal government
- School divisions
- Business
- Faith
- Advocacy groups
- Individuals with a lived experience of poverty
- Universities
- Funding bodies

Continued active and committed representation across this broad range of sectors, organizations and interest groups is crucial in moving forward with a Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty in Saskatoon.

A community-based planning group advised on the action plan process and the planning for the November 24<sup>th</sup> event. This group defined and applied guidelines for its and participants of the November 24<sup>th</sup> event affirmed these and agreed to apply them to the next steps.

- *Believe it is OK to question and challenge*
- *Tolerate differences*
- *Be patient with others and listen*
- *Don't make assumptions about what we each mean*
- *Create understanding*
- *Acknowledge that we're all equal and have expertise, knowledge and talent*

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- *We need all the pieces to make the puzzle complete*
- *Maintain a semi-formal format, allowing discussion and flexibility and staying on task*
- *Create an atmosphere of respect*
- *Keep an open mind*
- *Balance the need for action with a need for process*
- *Outside of this meeting, hold confidential what other people said, although you can share your own thoughts.*

### 3. Highlights of the Event: Moving to Action

The event focused on developing working groups around prioritized policy options with initial action steps and an organizational structure to coordinate them. Participants formed working groups around prioritized policy options from **Follow-up to Policy or Initiative Options in the Health Disparity in Saskatoon Report: Recommendations for Action in our Community-Working Document.**

Working groups were formed from the 19 policy options that had strong agreement and some agreement (see working document for a description of this process). Below is a list (in no particular order) of the 8 policy options that had enough people present to begin developing an action plan. Following this are the other 11 policy options that had people signed up for them but that did not enough people present to begin working together. In addition, the 3 new options suggested are listed.

\*Note: Group 1 was a unique group as it focused on the long-term vision for a coordinated poverty reduction strategy that would support and assist the working groups in moving the other policy options forward. This option is directly related to the collaborative vision of this initiative represented by the working model for change (house diagram) in the **Follow-up to Policy or Initiative Options in the Health Disparity in Saskatoon Report: Recommendations for Action in our Community-Working Document.** The model represents the need to build a solid foundation that captures the complexity of the issue, includes multisectoral representation, validates local decision-making and builds on community strengths and capacity.

#### **Policy options with action plans:**

##### 1. Develop a Multi-Year, Targeted Plan to Reduce Poverty

Develop an effective plan to reduce poverty and health inequality for Saskatoon and Saskatchewan that includes a multi-year approach with concrete measurable targets, broad support and an evaluation plan.

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## A. # of participants

- This group had 29 sign up and 15 present for the discussion.

## B. Summary of proposed actions:

- Identifying core leadership, the elements of which included:
  - Having dedicated staff and resources;
  - Taking the primary role;
  - Exploring the probability of new funds following the federal announcement; and
  - Looking for new ways to reallocate and share existing resources.
- Identifying **program areas** ‘with traction,’ notably mentorship programs and realizing that flexibility in programming will be important.
- Creating **infrastructure** suited to and supportive of this overarching plan.
- Ensuring processes and **ways of working** that honour and reflect collaboration and grassroots input.
- **Engaging with community** – securing will and political will, creating a positive vision and organizing various poverty reduction efforts.
- Honouring **evidence** already gathered and presented and considering collection of more related evidence – encouraging common data across agencies and taking a pan-provincial look at poverty reduction strategies and actions.
- Monitoring and **tracking our efforts** and progress as we proceed – ensuring we stage tracking efforts and make our outcomes realistic.

## 2. Increase Public Understanding of Social Determinants of Health

Enhance the understanding of the general public about the determinants of health and the economic costs of not proactively addressing poverty.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 21 sign up and 13 present for this discussion.

### B. Summary of proposed actions:

- Using what’s already there, build on those and celebrate current achievements, such as poverty awareness week.

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- Case study/story that shows the cost of homelessness - combine data with a qualitative story.
- Use the media effectively.
- Identify a variety of audiences including young children, adults, community groups, etc and use appropriate and effective methods of communication for that audience.
- This is an issue that affects all of us, not just those that live in poverty - promote this message.
- The topic needs friction, so that it can get the attention that is required.
- Develop a conduit or repository of options that people can draw upon as they become interested in addressing poverty issues. Give them a matrix or rubric of options once they have said, "I understand, now how can I help?"

## 3. Increase Support for Community Schools

Provide health and social services to schools in low income neighbourhoods in order to prevent school drop-out, encourage academic achievement, increase graduation rates and improve health.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 9 sign up and 6 present for this discussion.

### B. Summary of proposed actions:

- Bring key stakeholders together for coordination and sharing of information such as: Education, Business, Mental Health Services, Churches, SIMFC, Community Advocates Group
- Ethical challenges for this group might be: confidentiality
- There should be an inner city focus to this work
- Invite in those who signed up for the working group who were not present but wanted to be a part of the process (school divisions are key)
- Primary Health [Vikki] will contribute a facilitator
- Red Cross [Deanna] will contribute space and Deanna has offered to work with Lorne from the Cornerstone church to keep him in the information loop

## 4. More Health Resources in Low Income Neighbourhoods

The number of health resources in Saskatoon's low income neighbourhoods should be proportionate to the size of the population; and its disproportionate number of health disorders.

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### A. # Participants:

- This group had 11 sign up and 3 present for this discussion

### B. Summary of proposed actions:

- Create a Position Paper, or Backgrounder, that is written in accessible language and addresses:
  - top 10 (or whatever number works) health issues
  - \$ distribution
  - ways to even that distribution out
- The paper should also look at:
  - building blocks for good health / good life
  - what works at engaging people with available resources
- Our next steps:
  - Pam will convene a larger group meeting in January in order to allow the group to move toward action.

## 5. Increase Monthly Shelter Allowances

The Saskatchewan government should consider increasing monthly shelter allowances for all households receiving income assistance to match the 2008 average monthly rental rate and also include the total monthly cost for utilities.

In addition, shelter allowance rates should be reviewed bi-annually and compared to current average monthly shelter rates and brought up to market standards when necessary.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 12 sign up and 4 present for this discussion.

### B. Summary of proposed actions:

- There needs to be a realistic appreciation, identification and assessment of what is really needed to transition from poverty, and to survive daily.
- There needs to be a liaison between the people delivering the social assistance resources and those receiving it, who could more accurately and effectively assess what the needs are for survival... and also for making the transition from poverty.
- There needs to be an immediate response (by social assistance organizations) to crises as they arise (such as the recent economic boom and increased cost in rent and housing prices). It was identified that in order to enable an

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immediate response there would have to be some forward thinking and planning in place.

- It was identified that federal funds are no longer earmarked for the allocation of particular social assistance items, and it was suggested that this has led to a less effective use of funds as well as a reduced accountability and transparency for the use of these funds. It was suggested that earmarking such funds and reporting progress with respect to these funds (with the reporting perhaps effected by those distributing and those receiving) may improve the accountability and effectiveness of such funding.
- It was suggested that sensitivity training (ex. in University for Social Workers, or for those distributing funds at the department who do not attend university) is very important in preserving dignity of those living the experience.
- It was suggested and identified that there are systemic problems in the manner that social services are delivered to those living in poverty, and that it needs to be examined and changed.
- It was identified that there needs to be more resources allocated -- pure and simple. It was noted that people living on social assistance are not even reaching a level that is 'adequate' let alone a level that would allow them to transition from poverty.
- It was suggested that there needs to be incentives (like business subsidies) to encourage individual growth among those currently living in poverty. It was suggested that in this way, there is something motivating to move forward to, rather than simply existing in a manner that is barely 'adequate'.
- It was noted that there are unpaid advocates for those with lived experience that try to fill and deal with the gaps that have been caused by shortfalls in the current system. It was suggested that perhaps identifying the services provided by such advocates as well as identifying the gaps that they are dealing with would be good information in planning for the better provision of social services to those who need it.
- There was discussion about having Ian and Donna write a letter about these issues, for Debbie to take to the Minister of Social Services at the beginning of December.

### 6. Develop a Long-term, Consolidated, Comprehensive, Interagency Social Housing System for Hard to House Individuals

Develop a long term, consolidated, comprehensive, interagency social housing system in Saskatoon and Saskatchewan for hard to house

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individuals; including those living with mental health problems and addictions.

A. # Participants:

- This group had 13 sign up and 7 present for this discussion.

B. Summary of proposed actions:

- The group discussion revolved around the barriers and context and hadn't yet reached action steps

## 7. Support for Home Ownership

The provincial government should consider investing in a Saskatoon-based home ownership pilot program to convert 31 multi-units provincially owned affordable rental units to home ownership.

A long-term rent-to-own program should be considered to increase the number of households in stable, safe, affordable housing.

A. # Participants: This group had 9 sign up and 4 present for this discussion.

B. Summary of proposed actions:

- Group re-wrote the explanation of #27, with the expectation that it would then lend itself to be lobbied for.
  - The municipal, provincial, and federal governments need to facilitate the creation of a revolving housing investment fund which would assist families to transition from renting to owning their own homes. This type of funding would be used among other things to revitalize programs like the Centenary Affordable Housing Program and the Neighbourhood Home Ownership Program, and make them reflect current market conditions. In addition, the provincial government needs to provide funding to educational programs that help people to make a successful transition to home ownership.
  - Group re-wrote the explanation of #27, with the expectation that it would then lend itself to be lobbied for.
- Need to explore how existing home ownership programs could be modified to grow with current market conditions
  - In conjunction with city's low income housing
- Work toward a policy of rent-to-own

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- Legislate an equity system (to get the programming under the Residential Tenancy Act)
- Acknowledge equity in rent: equity caused by making home repairs, paying land tax...
- Policy for encouraging builders to build low income housing
- Proper funding for capacity building for those who want to become homeowners (education on how to own a home, responsibilities of home owner [i.e.: need to keep sidewalks clear of snow/ice], maintenance of property, financial implications on your personal credit, utility cost management, etc.)
- Create a land trust – REVOLVING EQUITY FUND – to make home ownership more accessible
  - Not a giveaway – but earned through creating equity in your home
- Involves real property, which is always a good investment
- All orders of government to make available all surplus lands to low income housing projects
- Next steps:
  - Meet with governments RE: how to move forward on this work (i.e.: the re-written recommendation)

### 8. Remove Work Earning Clawbacks

Work earning supplements should be coupled with the removal of work earning clawbacks to transition return to work and promote voluntary withdrawal from social assistance.

#### A. # Participants:

- This group had 10 sign up and 5 present for this discussion.

#### B. Summary of proposed actions:

- The Saskatoon Aboriginal Employment Subgroup is currently in the position that it could create a pilot project to prove how good transition planning could be successful in getting people on their feet as well as being cost effective.
- Saskatoon Tribal Council could run the pilot program.
- Social Services would have to be willing to relax the structure around policy for the project.
- CUISR could evaluate the measurable outcomes of the pilot.

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## Policy Options without actions:

### 1. Index Social Assistance Rates to Inflation

Social assistance rates should be increased as recommended in policy option #3 and then index future rates to inflation.

#### A. # Participants :

- This group had 12 sign up but only 2 present for this discussion.

### 2. Universal Child Care for Low Income Parents

Child care should be provided to all low income parents at no direct cost in community schools in low income neighbourhoods.

The pre-school and pre-kindergarten programs should be expanded in community schools in low income neighbourhoods and be provided at no direct cost to low income parents.

#### A. # Participants:

- This Group had 8 sign up but only 3 present for this discussion.

### 3. Reserve Education Placements for Low Income Students

Learning institutions like SIAST should allocate 10% of their existing skills training vacancies to adults who have been on social assistance for more than one year to take the program at no cost.

In addition, free child care (policy option #16) should be provided to those who choose to enter school in order to better their chances to re-enter the workforce in a skilled vocation.

The skills training sessions should be adapted to include academic support and if required support from health services (i.e., mental health).

#### A. # Participants:

- This group had 2 sign up.

### 4. Setting Measurable Goals: More Work for Aboriginal People

Aboriginal representation in the workforce should increase to 15% of full time service jobs, 15% of management positions and 15% of professional workplaces within 10 years; or by 2017.

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A. # Participants:

- This group had 3 sign up.

5. Change Lower Limit Tax Exemptions

Change the lower limit tax exemption for low income workers and offset the revenue loss by removing the lower limit tax exemption for higher income earners.

A. # Participants:

- No names were signed up for this group.

6. Increase Support for Parents on Leave

Increase the Employment Insurance rate for new parents on parental leave from 55% to 80% of employment income prior to leave.

A. # Participants:

- No names were signed up for this group.

7. Expand Affordable Housing Projects

The City of Saskatoon should continue to examine the benefits of development of a Land Trust, designating surplus city land to affordable housing projects, inclusionary zoning, improving the speed of approval process for affordable housing and a five year tax abatement for affordable housing projects/units.

A. # Participants:

- This group had 6 sign up but only 2 present for this discussion.

8. Expand Not-for-Profit Housing Authorities

The provincial government should consider purchasing 20 abandoned or neglected multifamily and apartment buildings in the heart of Saskatoon's six low income neighbourhoods, renovate them and transfer the title to not-for-profit housing authorities with the eventual goal of transferring title to home ownership.

The provincial government should consider adopting this policy for at least four years to address chronic housing shortages.

A. # Participants:

- This group had 1 sign up.

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## 9. Renewed Federal Responsibility for Social Housing

The federal government needs to restore funding for social housing to the levels established prior to 1986.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 5 sign up but only 1 present for this discussion.

## 10. Comprehensive Return to Work Programs

Return to work programs should include a comprehensive combination of adapted skills training, job search, job placement, on the job experience and life skills training in order to increase chances of transitional return to work. Health services should augment the return to work process when required.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 4 sign up but only 2 present for this discussion.

## 11. Aboriginal Self Determination

Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan should be afforded more control over health, social, education and justice policies and funding that disproportionately affect Aboriginal people.

### A. # Participants:

- This group had 1 sign up.

### **Other suggested options:**

#### 1. Resident-Led Neighbourhood Development

##### A. # Participants:

- This group had 3 sign up.

#### 2. Food Security

##### A. # Participants:

- This group had 1 sign up.

#### 3. Broader Engagement with Labour and Business Community

##### A. # Participants:

- This group had 2 sign up.

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## 4. Moving forward

There was clear community interest in moving towards the creation of a Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty for Saskatoon at the November 24<sup>th</sup> event. Two key focus areas were identified as immediate action steps:

1. Continue the discussions among the 7 working groups formed around poverty action areas.

**Action: To support these discussions, the November 24<sup>th</sup> Event Subcommittee will circulate a contact list in December to those that expressed interest in participating in each working group and encourage them to set up ongoing meetings.**

2. Form a group interested in determining the coordination and resource needs to sustain this work. This will enable a strong foundation to connect the work of the above groups and provide a leadership function to make a Community Action Plan a reality.

**Action: The November 24<sup>th</sup> Subcommittee will organize a leadership meeting in January. The November 24<sup>th</sup> Event Subcommittee will take the lead on planning this meeting. Please contact Christine Thompson at the United Way for more information on the January meeting (phone 975-7705, email [cthompson@unitedwaysaskatoon.ca](mailto:cthompson@unitedwaysaskatoon.ca)).**

## 5. Acknowledgements

This action plan has built on the work of many groups over the years. Key examples include: the work of QUINT; the Core Neighbourhood Development Council; the Roots of Poverty Project; CUISR Quality of Life work; the United Way consultation process; the Urban Aboriginal Strategy; the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition; the Charrette. All these processes have contributed to a broad interest and commitment to seriously tackle poverty in Saskatoon.

This event was possible thanks to the invaluable efforts of the planning group and the working groups (logistics and facilitation, analysis, and building readiness) in organizing this event. Members included (although not all have been able to participate in the meetings): Maria Basualdo, Ted Cardwell, Vanessa Charles, Kathie Cram, Barb Crockford, Jennifer Cushon, Sue Delanoy, Tanya Dunn-Pierce, Deb Frost, Cheryl Hand, Muhammed Hanif, Monique Harmon Atkinson, Trina Kingfisher, Rebecca Lehmann, Rev. James (Jim) McKay, Kevin Norlin, Helen Oliver, Fred Ozirney, Betty-Anne Person, Zelda Rempel, Fred Smith, and Christine Thompson.